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Idealism drew him into contra struggle

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WASHINGTON — Robert Owen is a 1980s version of the all-American boy — adventurous, athletic, bright and patriotic.

Those who know him say the 32-year-old, 6-foot, 4-inch Owen is a soft-spoken but tough-minded man driven by intense idealism to improve the world, defend the United States and fight communism.

Yet Owen's life also has been undergirded by trauma and, recently, controversy and mystery.

In recent months, Owen's name has been connected with one of President Reagan's most controversial programs: aid to the Nicaraguan contra rebels.

Officially, Owen was a paid consultant to the State Department's Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office (NHAO). His contract there expired May 28.

But unofficially, according to three administration officials who monitor contra activities and a senior contra official, Owen has been a secret operative acting as liaison between the National Security Council (NSC) and the contras to helppskirt a ban on direct involvement in contra military affairs by U.S. officials.

Named as defendant

Owen's name has come up in allegations of illegal contra activities, including gunrunning and alleged plots to murder dissident rebel leader Eden Pastora, who recently announced he was giving up the armed struggle. Owen is also one of 30 defendants named in a $23.8 million lawsuit filed in Miami federal court two weeks ago blaming the contras and their supporters for the May 30, 1984, bombing of a Pastora news conference in Nicaragua in which eight people were killed and 25 were injured, including Pastora.

Three U.S. officials and the contra consulted for this article said neither Owen nor the rebels were responsible for the bomb.

The four said Owen's main role was as intermediary between a senior NSC official, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, and the contras from late 1984 to mid-1985, precisely when Congress banned U.S. involvement with the rebels.

Exposing the arrangement under which North allegedly maintained contact with the rebels is one objective of a congressional investigation expected to begin after the vote later this month on Reagan's request for an additional $100 million in contra aid.

"Ollie handled the contra account at NSC," one of the U.S. officials said, referring to North. "But since he couldn't deal with the contras directly because of the [Congressional] restriction he needed an operative to allow the administration to continue assisting the contras after all other avenues had been exhausted. That's what Rob Owen did."

North refused comment, but an administration official authorized to speak for him said he "has not been involved in illegal activities." Owen declined to be interviewed.

For Owen, his involvement with the contras seems to have been the culmination of a lifelong desire to leave his mark on the world, to fight communism and to be close to war.

Judi Buckelew, a former White House press aide and Owen's former girlfriend, said Owen was deeply affected by the 1967 death of his older brother Dwight in Vietnam. The event influenced Owen to carry on his brother's ideals and avenge his death by opposing communism, Buckalew said.

Love of country

"Whatever Rob did for the contras, he did out of a sense of helping the country, like Dwight would have done," Buckalew said.

Owen was 13 when his brother was killed in a fire fight between Vietcong guerrillas and South Vietnamese district officials. Dwight was then officially working for the State Department's Agency for International Development, but a source close to the administration said he was actually a CIA agent.

His name is inscribed on a plaque in the State Department lobby honoring government officials killed under heroic circumstances.

Robert Owen's name first surfaced in print in a September 1983 Esquire magazine article in which author Christopher Buckley reviewed the traumas of Americans who tried but failed to get drafted for Vietnam. The segment on Owen said that he "worshipped" his brother and that Dwight's death "hit him very hard."

Six years later Owen was a freshman at Stanford, watching television in his dormitory, when the news showed the first freed prisoners of war, the article said.

"When Jeremiah Denton, who'd been a prisoner of the North Vietnamese for seven years, stepped to the microphone and said 'God bless America,' Owen suddenly found tears running down his cheeks. Not long afterward, the Marines happened to be on campus recruiting," according to the article.

"Owen had not awakened with the idea of signing up, but when he read an ad in that morning's student newspaper saying 'Don't Be Good Little Nazis: Stop the Marine Recruiting,' he went down for an interview," the article said.

Owen flunked the physical because of a high-school knee injury he sustained playing lacrosse.

Buckley said Owen decided then that "if and when the test ever comes, I'm going to get my red badge of courage, or die trying."

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Owen was born Oct. 21, 1953, in Providence, R.I., the youngest of three sons in a well-to-do family. He attended the prestigious and private Moses Brown School in Providence, then a Quaker school for boys, graduating in 1971. Owen was captain of the football team and co-captain of the lacrosse club.

Moses Brown headmaster David Burnham said Owen had a strong commitment to service.

A desire to help

"He had this tremendous desire to make the world better," Burnham said. "He had a very strong desire to help, to clean up politics, clean up corruption and whatever."

After Moses Brown, Owen went on to Stanford University where he earned a degree in political science.

In 1980, Owen put some of his ideals into practice in the same part of the world where his brother had served. He went to Thailand with the International Rescue Committee to help Cambodian refugees.

But Owen cut short his tour when word came that his father was dying. He returned to the United States to take care of his father.

Back home, Owen once more tried to enlist in the military, but the knee problem kept him out again. Acquaintances say he also applied to the CIA, but apparently was not successful. CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson declined comment.

In 1982, Owen finally went to work for the government. From March 15, 1982, to November of the following year, he served as legislative aide to Sen. Dan Quayle, R-Ind., handling Asian issues.

In 1983, Owen joined the Washington public relations firm of Gray and Co., and began his involvement with the contras.

According to a contra official, Owen contacted the rebels in late 1983, offering to lobby Congress on contra aid.

At first, the contras weren't impressed. Owen did not speak Spanish and did not seem to know Central America.

But Owen's involvement gradually grew. Buckalew said Owen met occasionally with Americans who were already involved with the contras. Others involved with the contras, including two jailed soldiers of fortune interviewed in Costa Rica last year by Herald staff writer Juan Tamayo, said Owen had been present in contra camps when weapons were delivered.

Another U.S. mercenary who once helped the contras, Jack Terrell, said he attended meetings with Owen, other mercenaries and contra officials in Houston and Miami in late 1984 in which combat strategy, gunrunning and the assassination of anti-Sandinista leader Pastora were discussed. Terrell said Owen claimed links to North and the NSC.

Terrell's claims have not been independently corroborated. The Justice Department said it has found "no substantive evidence" that they are true.

Whatever Owen's activities, he eventually became so valuable to the contras that when the State Department's NHAO rejected his job application last October, the contra leadership — Adolfo Calero, Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo — wrote a letter requesting his appointment.

The NHAO then hired him as a consultant through a contract with a nonprofit group that Owen had founded, Institute for Democracy, Education and Assistance (IDEA), according to NHAO director Robert Duemling.

Duemling told the House Foreign Relations Committee's Western Hemisphere subcommittee March 5 that Owen's tasks included helping the contras with administrative chores and health care services. John Flynn, a retired Air Force officer who lives in Texas and is one of three IDEA directors, said IDEA had been founded on Jan 9, 1985, to help the contras. Flynn said he met Owen in Costa Rica through John Hull, a U.S.-born farmer who owns a ranch in northern Costa Rica and who is frequently linked with contra activities.

Classified NHAO documents show that, as of Nov. 6, IDEA had received $50,675. Records on later payments to IDEA have not been made public.

A contra rebel official said that after he joined the NHAO, Owen stopped being a secret NSC conduit and has been involved with the rebel movement's Miskito Indian faction.

Herald special correspondent Karen Lowe contributed to this report

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